

How to Write an Abstract

A well thought out abstract determines whether your paper will be accepted for a conference presentation, or your publication selected for further reading. An abstract summarises, in one paragraph (usually 200-300 words) that is either unstructured or structured (with sub-headings), the main aspects of an entire research paper/thesis. The best approach is to plan your abstract using the seven points below, and then use these to structure your abstract.

1. **Introduction: Describe what topic/phenomenon your paper/thesis covers.** Provide the reader with a background to the study/present the main idea of the paper/thesis. Avoid unnecessary content.
2. **State the problem you (will) tackle(d).** What's the key research question? Again, in one sentence.
3. **Summarise the reasons for undertaking such a study.** Emphasise the research gap in the literature or rationalise the need for such a study. You could use a phrase such as "previous work has not yet...".
4. **Explain how you sought out to answer the research question.** What's your big idea? In other words, what is new, different, or important about how you approached the research?
5. **How did you go about conducting the research?** Provide a brief outline of the methods you used. Did you run experiments? Carry out case studies?
6. **Present the main findings of the paper/thesis.** Present the most important findings, results, or outcomes of your research (you can include descriptive statistics)
7. **What is the key impact of your research?** What conclusions did you draw and what are the implications? What is the primary take-home message?

Now structure the above into a single paragraph and refine it further so that it is coherent and concise. Here are some helpful tips for quality abstracts:

- They can be understood without reading the paper/thesis
- Provides a condensed and concentrated version of the full text
- Does not contain lengthy details about experiments or statistical analysis done
- Uses abstract language to guide the reader such as 'aim/purpose', 'study design', 'methods', 'findings', 'results'
- Has sentences that serve more than one function such as the aim and the methods/techniques used
- Does not contain undefined abbreviations or acronyms
- Does not contain citations
- Does not contain lengthy background information
- Does not contain any sort of illustration, figure, or table, or references to them

Example:

Several attempts have been made to examine the *in vivo* role of CD8⁺ T cells in simian immunodeficiency virus (SIV) infection, but no consensus has been reached [**introduction and rationale**]. To determine the role of CD8⁺ T cells in controlling SIV replication *in vivo* [**aim of study**], we examined the effect of depleting this cell population using an anti-CD8 monoclonal antibody, OKT8F [**methods**]. There was on average a 99.9% reduction of CD8 cells in peripheral blood in six infected *Macaca mulatta* treated with OKT8F. The apparent CD8 depletion started 1 h after antibody administration, and low CD8 levels were maintained until day 8. An increase in plasma viremia of one to three orders of magnitude was observed in five of the six macaques. The injection of a control antibody to an infected macaque did not induce a sustained viral load increase, nor did it significantly reduce the number of CD8⁺ T cells [**results**]. These results demonstrate that CD8 cells play a crucial role in suppressing SIV replication *in vivo* [**conclusion**]. [**160 words**]. Adapted from Jin, Xia, et al. (1999). *The Journal of Experimental Medicine* 189(6):991-998.

Resource: Anonymous. 2010. How to write an abstract in six easy steps. [\[Online\]](#). (Accessed 5 March 2015)

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